

Second Sunday of Easter – 2024

Acts 4:32-35

1 John 1:1—2:2

John 20:19-31

“Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). How many of y’all are familiar with that statement? How many of y’all have a firsthand familiarity with that prayer? We like that statement in the Old English, in the King James Version of the Scripture. It hits home, doesn’t it? Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief. It’s simple, honest, plainspoken, humble, faithful and hopeful all at once. None of us are paragons of faith. We believe. We truly, deeply, and steadfastly believe. But we have limits, it seems. We believe but we also continue to fear things which Jesus has defeated. We doubt the crucified and risen King’s Word; we doubt His interest in us; we doubt the practicality of Christianity in a world that is clearly inimical to Him. We limit the implications of what the Lord Christ has done. We limit what He will do.

Here’s an example: “Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?’” (John 11:39-40). Perhaps you are thinking, “Gee, Pastor, why are you throwing shade at poor Martha? It was Thomas who threw the faithless connotation fit about not believing that Jesus was risen from the dead. If you’re going to shade anyone, shade Thomas.” Martha is a perfect subject. Martha is a perfect me, a perfect you. Lazarus was dead. Martha’s brother was dead. Both Mary and Martha sent word, sent an urgent plea for help, and Jesus showed up late. “Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you’” (John 11:21-22). Does Martha believe that Jesus can raise Lazarus on His own authority and power or must He ask another, His Father, who alone has that power? What is Jesus’ status with Martha?

Your brother will rise again. Jesus said that to Martha as a tonic for her grief, as an assurance of a greater reality than the death she was so consumed with. The Greater Reality was Jesus Himself. “Your brother will rise again” meant more than she was able to see. “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day” (John 11:24). Martha, in Jesus’ presence, was looking far off. There He was; right in front of her. There’s no distant ambiguity in these words: “I AM the resurrection and the Life” (John 11:25). God is the resurrection and the Life and I AM God. Your brother will rise. The resurrection you speak of is present in Me. I AM the fulfillment of time. I AM the fulfillment of life. I AM the One through whom death and man’s estrangement from God is overcome.

Jesus: Your brother shall rise. Martha: Lord, there’s going to be an odor. Martha is me. Martha is you. Thomas is me. Thomas is you. Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.

The guy who said that prayer had a son who was mired in demon possession. To be a father and to see your son stricken with such turmoil is beyond upsetting. This father spoke to Jesus cautiously, “if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us” (Mark 9:23). How Jesus responds is both a rebuke and a call to faith. By speaking this way the Lord Christ elicits a strong response from the boy’s father. Be mindful of how He speaks to you, to all of us. Jesus

replied to the father, “If you can!” All things are possible for one who believes” (Mark 9:23). St. Mark tells us that the father *cried* his response. Yep; that’s what faith does when it is called out. Faith lurches out of the heart. Faith erupts with assent and trust and eagerness to believe. Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.

Thomas appears un-conflicted. “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (John 20:25). Thomas saw Jesus crucified. Thomas saw death claim the Lord of Life; pretty strong adversary, death. But Thomas was a pretty stout man. Do you know what comes from being around the Lord Christ? Courageous devotion. Not a chest-thumping bravado but a centered certainty that the Lord who loves me is in control of my life. That is where genuine courage comes from. The church is courageous. The church must be courageous. The only time for us in this holy house to live is now (John 9:4). The only life that you’ve been given to live is the life that God has given you. The only opportunity for expression of courage you will ever have is in the life and the circumstance that God gives you. Each of you is different. Each of you is valuable. Threats are to elicit the courage of faith. Moral challenges are to elicit devotion to Christ and His teaching. A culture awash in folly is continual opportunity for you to be courageous, faithful, unwavering, and wise. Attending the Divine Serve will make you courageous.

Jesus told His disciples that they needed to go to Judea. “Let us go to Judea again” (John 11:7). The disciples are not keen on this plan. “Rabbi, just now the Jews were seeking to stone you and you are going there again!?” (John 11:8). Dead Lazarus is there, in Judea. Jesus is going to Bethany to raise Lazarus. Jesus is going there to reveal His glory. The disciples correctly see the threat to their own lives. A servant is not greater than their master (John 13:16). That’s what Jesus taught them. The disciples could suffer much by being connected to Jesus. “Let us go to Judea again” (John 11:7). Jesus pulls His disciples into His journey and into the risk. You are a disciple of Jesus Christ, are you not? It can be a fearsome prospect. It takes courage. “So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him’” (John 11:16). I like Thomas. That kind of character inspires me. I need Thomas as a friend. It’s curious. Thomas saw Lazarus raised from the dead. Thomas saw the glory of God in Bethany – life out of death. And a week later Thomas saw Jesus hanged on a cross and laid in a tomb. He had heard about the Lord’s resurrection, but he obstinately refused to take his friends’ word. Can’t be, he said.

Faith and hope had died in Thomas, or so it seemed. To be sure, Thomas was tested. It was no accident that events played themselves out as they did. Thomas’ absence at Christ’s first appearance, the disciples reporting the firsthand account of Jesus’ resurrection, Thomas’ rejection of the Good News and then, ultimately, Jesus reprising that initial appearance and turning His full attention to this priceless man; all this was no accident. The most glorious confession of faith is about to emanate from Thomas’ mouth. Tested Thomas, whose heart had been in the crucible, whose emotions had been blistered and left raw, who sought refuge in denial and the cold comfort of defeat – he is the one who has the honor in John’s Gospel of uttering the highest statement of faith. Thomas had said that he had to see to believe. Jesus commands Thomas to reach out his hand and put it in the crucified Lord’s side. Do not be unbelieving, but believe. “Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (John 20:28).

Thomas knows who Jesus is. My Lord and my God. Faith erupts with assent and trust and exaltation and vigor and hope and joy. My Lord and my God.

In this life we will all be tested. When we die we will see Christ, the crucified King who saved us by His blood, who shepherded us through the valley of the shadow of death. On that day, on the day that you die, out of your mouth will tumble the glorious words, “my Lord and my God.” You are blessed – now. Jesus pronounces you blessed – now. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (John 20:29). You’ve heard the Gospel. The Holy Spirit has enlightened your heart, your mind. You believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and by believing you have life in His name. How blessed are you, the saints of Christ the King!